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Re-mastering the Ghosts

Mudrooroo and Gothic Refigurations

Gerry Turcotte

No rest, no rest, her ghost it roamed,
her ghost it cried,
And the black folk saw and heard her cries...
Mudrooroo, The Song Circle of Jacky

PART ONE*

Generically dis/figuring majority cultural codes

This paper discusses the question of the Gothic mode as it has been used to construct a eurocentric notion of Aboriginality, though its emphasis is on the way the mode has been turned on its head, as it were, by Mudrooroo, to produce an oppositional, revisionist discourse that works to undermine European historiography. The principal examples in this reading will be Master of the Ghost Dreaming (1991) and The Undying (1998), which locate their ghost and vampire tales at the site of the invasion of Australia by Europeans, and around a battle which was frequently effected through missionary activities.

Particularly fascinating is Mudrooroo's rewriting of the 'conciliating' efforts of George Augustus Robinson, in what was then called Van Diemen's Land (until 1855 – now Tasmania), and his disastrous attempts to establish a 'Friendly Mission' that would effectively rid the small island of its Aboriginal inhabitants and so leave it free for white settlement. This mission would see the death of most of its inhabitants, including that of "Truganini [...] regarded at the time as 'the last of her race'." ¹

Tasmania is a particularly apt place to begin a discussion of the Gothic since it has so often been figured, in the Australian mainland imaginary, as a space of terror, of backwardness, of depravity. Australia itself, however, long before it was ever 'discovered' by European explorers and cartographers, was constructed as a space of monstrosity, where even to believe in its possibility

* The present essay is an expanded version of a paper presented at the EACLALS conference on "Colonies, Missions, Cultures", Tübingen, 6—11 April 1999, which is due to appear in its original form in the conference proceedings.

¹ Henry Reynolds, Fate of a Free People: A Radical Re-Examination of the Tasmanian Wars (Melbourne: Penguin, 1995): 5.

was considered heresy.² Tasmania, owing to its notorious convict prisons, was seen to be even darker.

Ken Gelder begins his study Reading the Vampire by mentioning a coincidental and yet no less fascinating moment in the European naming of that island. The first map of Van Diemen's Land, by Thomas Scott in 1830, was produced when "over half" of the island was colonised. "But although the remainder," as Gelder puts it, "was left blank, it was nevertheless given a name: Transylvania."³ And though this naming "precedes the popularised association of Transylvania and vampires" effected by Bram Stoker's Dracula, "it also, perhaps, anticipates that later association."⁴ If it is true, as Gelder maintains, that "one of the peculiarities of vampire fiction is that it has – with great success – turned a real place into a fantasy,"⁵ it is certainly true that European epistemologies have persistently enacted a similar refiguration of the 'other': constructing and inventing a fantastic identity for 'undiscovered' or recently 'discovered' lands and peoples.

Many contemporary Indigenous writers respond to such constructions by explicitly hijacking familiar European stories, tropes and figurations, and by dis/figuring them through satire, parody, and other forms of ritual dismemberment. The Dracula myth is particularly appropriate in this context. If we accept that Dracula enacts what one critic has called the "anxiety of reverse colonization" by "bringing the terror of the Gothic home", in contradistinction to the usual flow of the Gothic into "displaced" lands, times and spaces,⁶ then it is possible to read Mudrooroo's on-going account of the invasion of Australia as a particularly powerful elaboration and satire of that fear, relocated into the orientalist space itself.

In his Master series⁷ Mudrooroo re-animates the figure of the vampire as a European presence which descends upon the Australian landscape to suck it dry, and to contaminate its spaces. The Indigenous figures who meet this invading force are alternatively perplexed and continuously adaptable, transforming themselves, their songlines, their very world, in order to resist acculturation into what is presented as a devilish, impoverished and ultimately soul-destroying enterprise. At the same time, Mudrooroo cleverly signals the way the 'other' is fetishised in that process of projection so typical of European Gothic narratives.

² See my development of this idea in relation to the Gothic in Gerry Turcotte, "Australian Gothic," in Handbook to Gothic Literature, ed. Marie Mulvey Roberts (London: Macmillan, 1998): 10–19.

³ Ken Gelder, Reading the Vampire (London: Routledge, 1994): 1.

⁴ Gelder, Reading, 1.

⁵ Gelder, Reading, 1.

⁶ Stephen Arata, "The Occidental Tourist: Dracula and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization," Victorian Studies 33 (Summer 1990): 621–45.

⁷ Master of the Ghost Dreaming (1991), The Undying (1998), Underground (1999) and The Promised Land (2000).

The Gothic began by locating its darkest narratives ‘elsewhere’, but its most terrifying accounts were those which returned to the home, or the self, as the source of the monstrous. Dracula is one of many Gothic narratives which chill by alerting its readers to the enemy without, whose greatest power is its ability to colonise from within. How fitting, then, that Mudrooroo should seize on this narrative trope and turn it against the invading culture. For Mudrooroo, Australia is filled with spiritual forces, but the ghostly – the otherworldly – is logically identified as a White invading presence, literally from another world. Much has been made of his artful figuration of the White man as num, a term suggesting both a ghostliness and a lack of feeling.⁸

In Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World (1983) and in Master of the Ghost Dreaming, Mudrooroo mobilises the metaphor of ghostliness to speak of competing dreamings, white and black, and to meditate on the ability of Aboriginal cultures to respond to invasive forces through adaptability. Wooreddy and Jangamuttuk learn the dreamings of whites in order to resist their power. They become Masters of the Ghost Dreaming to counter the bad ‘magic’ of invasion.

In Doctor Wooreddy and Master of the Ghost Dreaming, which retell the missionary tale of George Augustus Robinson and his attempts to replace ancient Aboriginal beliefs with his own Christian God, Mudrooroo charts the devastating consequences of these supposedly well-meaning European policies. Robinson is an especially relevant target both because of his actual impact on the Tasmanian Aborigines as well as because of the way he scripted himself into history. Robinson invented himself, as it were, and this heroicized and fictive persona determined for a long time how his accomplishments were read. Mudrooroo’s interrogation of this figure, therefore, becomes a specifically textual deconstruction of what, for the Tasmanian Aborigines, was one of the most disabling ‘texts’ of empire.

The ‘real’ G.A. Robinson makes his appearance in the context of what is referred to as the Black War in Tasmania, the confrontation between the Tasmanian Aborigines and the European invaders between 1829–31. He comes to prominence after the failure of the infamous ‘Black Line’, a military offensive which would call on “the military forces, the field police, and every able-bodied male colonist, whether bond or free [to] form a human chain across the settled districts” of Tasmania.⁹ The group was expected to spend some three weeks moving “in a pincer movement

⁸ See for example Adam Shoemaker’s reading of Doctor Wooreddy: “The European invaders are not human at all — they are ‘ghosts’ or num; they do not speak any form of civilized language but mumble a form of simple gibberish; they are greedy, violent and foolish. In brief, they are irredeemably primitive.” [Mudrooroo: A Critical Study (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1993): 48].

⁹ Lyndall Ryan, The Aboriginal Tasmanians, 2nd edition (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996): 110.

south and east,”¹⁰ in order to trap the Aborigines on the Tasman Peninsula and convert it into a reserve.

Though it is not uncommon to highlight the ludicrousness of the plan in accounts of the event, Ryan is correct in stressing the success of the endeavour and of not allowing parody to elide its material effects. The two thousand men, carrying “a thousand stand of arms, thirty thousand rounds of ammunition, and three hundred pairs of handcuffs,” successfully “drove the Oyster Bay, North Midlands, and Ben Lomond people” off their land.¹¹ As Rae Ellis puts it in her book, Trucanini: Queen or Traitor?, “the sight of hundreds of armed men backed by hundreds more within signalling distance impressed the Aborigines. It probably did more to make them realise the hopelessness of their position than any other action taken by the authorities.”¹²

In the aftermath of this exercise, Robinson began what one history of the time calls “praiseworthy and Christian-like endeavours to bring in the whole of the Aborigines.”¹³ Robinson’s exertions were “crowned with success; and so that the evil has been removed, it may appear of little consequence in what way it may have been effected.”¹⁴ This account, written by Henry Melville, editor of The Colonial Times, styles the efforts of Robinson as a type of heroic quest. Virtually alone, the rhetoric seems to suggest, he headed off into the wilderness, accompanied by Aboriginal translators, and began the task of ‘persuading’ the Aboriginal people to accompany him to a type of mission. After this rounding up we are told in chilling terms that,

[a]t the present writing, the Aborigines are never heard of – indeed, Mr Robinson has asserted, that there are less than a score now at large in the Colony [...] At Flinders Island there are now about eighty Aborigines. These wild creatures live a life of indolence, occasionally hunting the kangaroo, or passing their time in their Aboriginal custom.¹⁵

¹⁰ Ryan, The Aboriginal Tasmanians, 110.

¹¹ Ryan, The Aboriginal Tasmanians, 112.

¹² Vivienne Rae Ellis, Trucanini: Queen or Traitor? (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1981): 49. But see also Reynolds’ argument that “in the public mind, the massive display of power during the Black Line has become fused with the exodus to Bass Strait.” Reynolds disagrees and goes on to argue that it wasn’t fear, or force, which drove the Aboriginal people to the mission, but a recognition that in the face of such overwhelming odds they would have to negotiate. Whilst I agree with Reynolds’ notion that the Aboriginal peoples were clearly and intelligently ‘negotiating’ a type of treaty with Robinson in exchange for their ‘removal’ from the land, a treaty which Robinson then broke to his own shame, it is still somewhat problematic to underplay, as Reynolds does, the fact that, in his words, “the prolonged violence of the Black War provided the backdrop to, even the necessary condition for, the removal of the Tasmanians” (Reynolds, Fate of a Free People, 133).

¹³ Henry Melville, The History of Van Diemen’s Land: From the Year 1824 to 1835, Inclusive, During the Administration of Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur, Part II, ed. & intro. George Mackaness (Sydney: D.S. Ford, 1959): 38.

¹⁴ Melville, History of Van Diemen’s Land, 38—39.

¹⁵ Melville, History of Van Diemen’s Land, 39.

This extraordinary, almost pastoral account, we now know, elides the fact that the Aboriginal detainees were dying of infectious diseases at the temporary mission. This fact is signalled in the very next sentence of this report in a manner which seems at odds with the previous symbol of relaxation and naturalness. "It is generally believed," Melville continues, "that this race of human beings will soon become extinct altogether, as the deaths are common, and the increase nothing equal in proportion. Little is known as to the manner in which they are governed, and the Colonists are not at all informed of the proceedings of the Government towards them."¹⁶ Melville goes on to 'lament' that this gentler approach to Aboriginal people was not tried before the 'Black War'. The perceived success of Robinson's project "have made all lament, that kindness and good treatment were not sooner made the means of ridding the Colony of the sable owners of the soil, and that the European musket and the bayonet were the instruments that caused retaliation."¹⁷

The vision of Robinson as a godly hero is without foundation. Robinson, we must remember, was a voluminous writer, who used lengthy reports, based on his own jealously guarded and more detailed journals, as a way of securing his own advancement. This advancement was attempted through a construction of himself as a consummate mediator, philanthropist and negotiator, effected through "often exaggerated and inaccurate accounts of his activities."¹⁸ As Rae-Ellis makes clear, "Robinson's journals are a confusing mixture of false and factual information."¹⁹ For someone who prided himself as a conciliator there is some irony to the fact that "it is rare to find words of praise for Robinson from those who knew him personally."²⁰ In any study of Robinson's reports one of the most difficult and important tasks is deciphering the 'truth' from the embellishment, his record of success in contexts where promotion might be possible, and his observations where imminent gain was not as obvious.

Rae-Ellis argues that his account of the Aboriginal people themselves can be trusted above his inventory of successes because no gain could be had from the former. It is probably important to

¹⁶ Melville, History of Van Diemen's Land, 39.

¹⁷ Melville, History of Van Diemen's Land, 39. The passage continues: "The whole affair is now ended, and thousands of lives have been lost by hostile measures. It is, nevertheless very easy now to point out what plans ought to have been adopted; but it should be recollected, that when martial law was proclaimed, the Colonists were suffering from the 'Guerilla' war; and although the aborigines may in most skirmishes have been worsted, still their depredations were harrasing [sic] to the settlers, who considered themselves masters of the Colony, and protected themselves accordingly. Nothing can be offered in extenuation of the conduct of the first Colonists towards these bewildered creatures, and the historian must ever lament, that he has to record outrages so inhuman and so unjust on the part of a British community."

¹⁸ Vivienne Rae Ellis, Vivienne, Black Robinson: Protector of Aborigines (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1996): xiv. The variation in the spelling of Rae-Ellis's name reflects the author's own practice. Her name is spelled without a hyphen in the 1981 book, and with a hyphen in the 1996 volume. I have used the latter spelling except in reference to the earlier edition.

¹⁹ Rae Ellis, Black Robinson, xiv.

²⁰ Rae Ellis, Black Robinson, xiii.

temper her confidence, however, by noting that though his observations of “Aboriginal content” might arguably be labelled “accurate” because they were recorded in “good faith”,²¹ we still need to remember that these images, impressions and ideas were nevertheless filtered through his age’s understanding: through the social, political, scientific and religious epistemology of the time. No matter how ‘faithful’ he might be in describing what he saw, this did not guarantee that he saw ‘faithfully’, accurately. It is telling that so many of his actual travel notebooks should be filled with lacunae: either gaps where he intended but never got to fill in botanical names, with text written in ‘indelible pencil’ or accounts produced in poor light by a campfire, often transcribed from Aboriginal sources (which he of course felt he understood completely, a delusion of some importance in assessing Robinson’s life’s work).²² Most importantly, then, we need to restress Rae-Ellis’s conclusion that Robinson’s “reputation as the friend of the Aborigine was a creation of Robinson’s imagination, designed solely to advance his own career,”²³ or at least to recognise that his sincere efforts to assist the Aboriginal people had little material effect in Tasmania. In This Whispering in Our Hearts, Henry Reynolds goes on to show how, compelled by his obvious betrayal and failure of the Aboriginal Tasmanians, Robinson did indeed have some impact on social policy after he had moved to become Chief Protector of Aborigines at Port Phillip between 1839 and 1849.²⁴ That this was of little comfort to the Tasmanian Aborigines is too obvious to elaborate on here.

Mudrooroo’s rewriting of this character is blistering in its ridicule. In Doctor Wooreddy and Master of the Ghost Dreaming Robinson is refigured as a bumbling, hopelessly inefficient, hypocritical failure of a human being. Robinson lusts after his charges whom he admonishes with religious diatribes about modesty; he pontificates endlessly; he loses himself in the bush or contracts severe skin ailments. All the while he is tended to and saved from himself by mocking, and infinitely wiser counterparts, Wooreddy and Jangamuttuk, who are shown to be spiritual advisers to their people. They humour the incompetent missionary, whilst simultaneously labouring to find a way to survive the Government’s genocidal activities. And so another important element enters into this discussion. As well as a ‘real’ white figure of history, there are also ‘real-life’ Aboriginal leaders who are profoundly implicated in this story, and who are reintroduced by Mudrooroo in his re/vision of Black History.

²¹ Rae Ellis, Black Robinson, xiv.

²² Again, see Rae-Ellis, Black Robinson, for her account of these journal entries, Robinson’s virtually unreadable script, the blank spaces and so forth.

²³ Rae Ellis, Black Robinson, xvi.

Specifically, Mudrooroo retells the story of the role of Wooreddy, and to a lesser extent, of Trucannini, in the campaign to assist ‘The Great Conciliator’ to carry out his plans. Indeed, it is widely held that Robinson would have been unable to reach most of the Aboriginal groups whom he contacted in his early forays into ‘Transylvania’ to negotiate with the different free Aborigines had he not been assisted by large groups of mission Aborigines. Chief among these figures were Trucannini, perhaps the most ‘famous’ of the Aboriginal people, and her husband Wooreddy. Trucannini has been widely represented as a traitor to her people for her role in this enterprise. Virtually every account of Trucannini figures her in sexual terms, highlighting her beauty in particular, as though this is of any relevance to the story.

Mudrooroo seems to subscribe to this view, shifting his focus to Wooreddy by way of heroicizing this figure. Shoemaker reads this shift as part of the radicalness of Mudrooroo’s vision, “inverting the traditional concentration upon Truganinni and ‘The Great Conciliator’.”²⁵ It is probably truer to say that this focus away from Trucannini aligns itself with what could be seen as Mudrooroo’s at times misogynistic view of women and his reluctance to feature a female as ‘hero’.²⁶ For all of Mudrooroo’s radical attacks on Imperial history, he has, throughout his work, displayed a harsh vision of Aboriginal women, and Trucannini seems to be no exception.²⁷ Indeed, in some ways, and despite the briefly sympathetic note he sounds for her in the poem cited in the epigraph to this essay, Mudrooroo seems to make an example of Trucannini because of his perceived sense of her role as betrayer of her people. This is ironic given the sense in some quarters that women in general, and Trucannini in particular, played a key role in negotiating with Europeans and therefore of avoiding further bloodshed.²⁸

²⁴ See in particular Chapter 3 of *This Whispering in Our Hearts* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), and Reynolds’ argument that “Robinson almost certainly betrayed the Tasmanians by failing to deliver on his promise that they would be able to return to their homelands after a short stay on Flinders Island. There is much evidence to suggest that Robinson was deeply conscious of his part in the betrayal” (Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, 48).

²⁵ Shoemaker, *Mudrooroo*, 50. Readers will note that there are many different spellings of the Aboriginal names here, particularly for Trucannini and Wooreddy. This reflects what Ian Anderson has called the poor “listening skills on the early frontier of those white people who recorded this history [“Reclaiming Tru-ger-nan-ner: De-Colonising the Symbol,” in *Speaking Positions: Aboriginality, Gender and Ethnicity in Australian Cultural Studies*, ed. Penny van Toorn & David English (Melbourne: Victoria U of Technology, 1995): 40, note 1].” I have adopted the most common spelling in this article, though to claim that it is correct or authoritative would be to give weight to the fiction of European knowledge about Aboriginal people, a fiction which Anderson, for one, satirizes by variously mis-spelling Trucannini’s name throughout his article. Anderson also makes the point that in representing Trucannini as the last of her kind, she becomes a colonial symbol who “signifies the land empty of natives, and declares the colonial power over” (Anderson, “Reclaiming,” 32). Anderson, like Mudrooroo, vehemently rejects these European fictions.

²⁶ See, for example, his dismissal of the guerilla warrior ‘Walyer’, a figure who caused great grief to the settlers, and yet who is dismissed in *Wooreddy* by her former lieutenant, Ummarra, as having “given up so easily and died so easily” (Mudrooroo, *Wooreddy*, 203).

²⁷ For a discussion of this point see Adam Shoemaker, “Rewriting History”, and his discussion of Lyndall Ryan’s view that Mudrooroo’s work is “curiously misogynist” (Shoemaker, *Mudrooroo*, 59).

²⁸ See Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People* for a discussion of this very point, in particular Chapter 5.

Reynolds, in describing the role Trucannini played, notes that “her motives have been tossed about by historians since the nineteenth century,” adding that “when assessing her role historians give little credit to Trugernanna.”²⁹ As he goes on to say, she is cast as “a mindless black bimbo”, a woman whose “promiscuous enjoyment of the admiration of men” suggested that she “simply lived for the moment”. In some versions it is Robinson and Wooreddy who save her from this life of destitution. Robert Hughes, for example, argues that she was “busy becoming a sealer’s moll, sterile from gonorrhoea, hanging around the camps and selling herself for a handful of tea and sugar, when Robinson and his guide Woorrady persuaded her to come on their long strange journey.”³⁰ These views, of course, fail to allow for Trucannini’s extraordinary suffering as one explanation for her participation in Robinson’s project. Moreover, as Reynolds points out, it also fails to acknowledge the courage and wisdom of Trucannini, her acute sense of the political picture that was developing around her, and her courageous efforts to help avert a catastrophe by consciously participating in what she may well have thought was the formation of a treaty for the Aboriginal people.³¹ No doubt for some, this will be read as a politically correct rewriting of Trucannini by ‘black arm-band historians’.

Lyndall Ryan, in reviewing Mudrooroo’s work, argues that though he “does not quite paint Truganini as a traitor, he certainly implies that in sleeping with white men without the apparent consent of the Aboriginal men, she renounced her Aboriginal identity.”³² Shoemaker agrees with this point, noting that “in Mudrooroo’s fiction, women are generally either absent, are secondary, supporting characters or [they] are one-dimensional (often sexual) objects.”³³ Where Mudrooroo ‘fails’ to account for the power of Aboriginal women, or to overturn traditional patriarchal accounts of women (something which he struggles to overcome in Master of the Ghost Dreaming), he nevertheless effectively and aggressively rewrites the white historical account of Aborigines as failed or inefficient warriors. Building on admittedly white documentary evidence,³⁴ Mudrooroo re-writes the roles of Aboriginal warriors, showing that they were cunning and effective adversaries despite the insurmountable odds.

Master of the Ghost Dreaming is important for a number of reasons. As Shoemaker has noted, it is fascinating firstly because it marks Mudrooroo’s return, after some eight years, to the theme of

²⁹ Reynolds, Fate of a Free People, 139—40.

³⁰ For ease of referencing, these descriptions are cited from Reynolds, Fate of a Free People, 140. They are, respectively, the views of Rae-Ellis and Robert Hughes.

³¹ Again, see Reynolds, Fate of a Free People, 142—43.

³² Quoted in Shoemaker, Mudrooroo, 60.

³³ Shoemaker, Mudrooroo, 60.

the Aboriginal Tasmanians,³⁵ a revisitation which allows him to re-write, perhaps more militantly and more optimistically, his earlier account of Aboriginal resistance. Where, in the first text, the vision was one of inevitable collapse, a prescription to endure the ending of the world, in Master of the Ghost Dreaming “the novel resonates with the rhythms of a different Australia and a different mental universe.”³⁶ If in the earlier novel “Robinson’s version of Christianity [...] seems to succeed,” the latter book “decentres the whole concept of proselytising.”³⁷ As Shoemaker goes on to say, “if anything, it is Jangamuttuk and his wife Ludgee (Mudrooroo’s reinvention of Wooreddy and Truganinni) who convert Fada and Mada (the ironic echo of ‘The Great Conciliator’ and his spouse).”³⁸

Jangamuttuk’s chief weapon is parodic mimicry, usually of key ritualistic moments. The novel opens, in fact, with a ceremonial exorcism of sorts, where the tribes people have painted European costumes – lapels, insignia, even pockets – onto their bodies. Jangamuttuk’s purpose is not to reproduce “a realist copy”; he has “no intention of aping the European.”³⁹ Jangamuttuk is seeking to adapt the “alien cultural forms” in order to “possess” the European. He is preparing the groundwork so that his people can enter “into the realm of the ghosts” to possess “the essence of health and well-being” of the invaders. Mudrooroo here is literally describing a ghostly type of possession, a reverse colonisation of the European invader.

Master of the Ghost Dreaming destabilises the historical accounts the earlier novel was based on, by more radically distorting the names by which the familiar figures were known, but also by deviating more distinctly from the documented history. One such gesture is the inclusion of an African character, Wadawaka, which, for Shoemaker, is a sign of Mudrooroo’s attempts to create “a parable about the colonial experience anywhere [...] This seems to imply a post-colonial solidarity between the formerly oppressed.”⁴⁰

Where Doctor Wooreddy had signalled a quiescent defeat before the European onslaught, Master of the Ghost Dreaming enacts a specific, hallucinogenic and unqualified conquering of the mission, where a large boulder, propelled by a pulsing crystal, rolls down a steep slope until “it reached the mission compound, flattened the cemetery and rolled onwards. Fada’s monument to

³⁴ Mudrooroo’s principal source for his rewritings is N.J.B. Plomley, Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson, 1829–1834 (Tasmania: Tasmanian Historical Research Association, 1966), as he himself admitted in an interview with the author.

³⁵ See Shoemaker, Mudrooroo, Chapter 4, “Turning the Circle”.

³⁶ Shoemaker, Mudrooroo, 67–8.

³⁷ Shoemaker, Mudrooroo, 68.

³⁸ Shoemaker, Mudrooroo, 68.

³⁹ Mudrooroo, Master of the Ghost Dreaming (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1991): 3.

⁴⁰ Shoemaker, Mudrooroo, 71.

history, the chapel, stood directly in its path. The huge boulder pressed it into the earth. All that was left was the square outline of what had once been a church.”⁴¹ As well as a type of wish-fulfilment narrative, what the ending of Master of the Ghost Dreaming puts in place is a jarring, non-realist fusion of narrative types. As soon as the dust clears, the novel ends by announcing that “the dismal period was over.”⁴² The novel concludes with a note about the Aboriginal heroes of the tale: “As for our band of intrepid voyagers, their further adventures on the way to and in their promised land await to be chronicled, and will be the subject of further volumes.”⁴³

The abrupt ending and peculiar postscript signal Mudrooroo’s refusal to play by the rules. They underscore his insistence on blurring generic categories so that the very literary guidelines which, elsewhere, he has identified as prisoning (the laws of genre, for example) are contested and, if not overturned then at least destabilised. They are, in point of fact, made unfamiliar, precisely at the point where they begin to become identifiable. Generic categories, in other words, are made uncanny: familiar and yet unfamiliar, simultaneously.⁴⁴

This is why Mudrooroo, particularly in Master of the Ghost Dreaming, focuses so frequently on rituals and ritual re-enactments. What is often enacted at the level of ritualistic or celebratory protest, however, is frequently attended by or articulated through the manipulation of genre and generic stability. Genre, of course, is ritual as well. It allows for the rehearsal of social and literary conventions according to seemingly binding rules. Genre is a guideline for how things should be and operate. It has also been read, including by Mudrooroo, as a way of policing Aboriginal writing. As Mudrooroo observed in Writing from the Fringe,

[g]enres have developed as a European way of categorising works of literature. In themselves, they are ways of manipulating the text so that the reader is led from an intuitive to a logical response to the work. Not only this, but the Aboriginal writer is led to believe that there are fixed categories of literature to which he or she must conform. If we as writers accept this we, in effect, dilute the Aboriginality of our work.⁴⁵

Mudrooroo’s generic rewriting is most interesting when he turns his hand to the Gothic mode. Gothic tales are usually about oppression and violence, narratives which blur and contest the very

⁴¹ Mudrooroo, Master, 146.

⁴² Mudrooroo, Master, 147.

⁴³ Mudrooroo, Master, 148.

⁴⁴ I am alluding here to Sigmund Freud’s well-known essay “The Uncanny”, in Collected Papers: Papers on Metapsychology, Papers on Applied Psycho-Analysis, tr. Joan Rivière, vol. 4 (London: The Hogarth P, 1956): 368–407. For a development of Freud’s theory of the uncanny through readings of Australian and Aboriginal literature see Gerry Turcotte, “Footnotes to an Australian Gothic Script: The Gothic in Australia,” Antipodes 7.2 (December 1993): 127–34; “How Dark Is My Valley? Canadian and Australian Gothic,” Scarp 22 (May 1993): 26–32; and “Australian Gothic.” See a more recent reading of the Aboriginal sacred and the uncanny in Ken Gelder & Jane M. Jacobs, Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1998).

⁴⁵ Mudrooroo, Writing from the Fringe (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1990): 170.

certainties which contextualise and make possible such narratives. Just as interesting for the purposes of this paper is that the Gothic has frequently been used by imperial agencies to identify Aboriginality as primitive, pagan and unenlightened, precisely by returning to the origins of the word, so that in one easy gesture the ‘Dark Ages’ and Aboriginal Australia are equated. Both are dark, unenlightened.⁴⁶

Given Mudrooroo’s interest in re-writing disabling European forms, and dislodging their authoritative hold over the Aboriginal imaginary, it is not surprising that he should turn increasingly towards this mode of writing. And in his sequels to Master of the Ghost Dreaming, he embraces the Gothic’s most recognisable form – the vampire story – as a way of acknowledging and overturning this association.

PART TWO

The vampire bites back?

The images of the ghostly and predatory, of the vampiric and demonic, are everywhere in Mudrooroo’s writing, but it isn’t until The Undying that he creates an actual vampire, Amelia, and in a way which is particularly fascinating. At the end of Master of the Ghost Dreaming, Jangamuttuk, Ludjee, their children and Wadawaka, together with a small group of Aboriginal survivors, take over a ship and sail away from the Tasmanian mission that has entrapped them. In The Undying they arrive at mainland Australia, hoping, presumably, for a fresh start. Instead, they find that the country is being preyed upon by a female European vampire who enjoys the taste of eucalyptus in the Australian blood,⁴⁷ and who has a predilection for consuming male genitals. More confusing still is that her accomplice is an Aboriginal man named Renfiel, in a spelling so close to Stoker’s that we are not meant to miss the connection. Finally, to make the figure even more complex, Amelia is said to be Eliza Fraser’s sister.

Fraser, as Mudrooroo well knows, is one of the most controversial and overloaded figures in Australian settlement history, a woman shipwrecked in 1836, and putatively kidnapped and victimised by her Aboriginal captors. Fraser would become a signifier for the evilness of Aboriginal Australians, a justification for punitive expeditions to rescue her, and later, in a dramatic change of fortune, she would go from mother of empire to symbol of female moral degradation, being blamed (perhaps as Trucannini had been) for her violation at the hands of her captors and

⁴⁶ For more extended readings of this particular issue see Penny van Toorn, “The Terrors of Terra Nullius: Gothicising and De-Gothicising Aboriginality,” World Literature Written in English 32.2 & 33.1 (1992-93): 87—97; and also Turcotte, “Australian Gothic.”

⁴⁷ Mudrooroo, The Undying (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1998): 137.

rescuers. Perhaps most like Trucannini, she would be resented for taking charge of her life, for speaking for herself, and for refusing to be silenced by patriarchy and by history.⁴⁸

That Mudrooroo would invoke her in this elliptical way is a sign of his brilliant understanding of the fetishism of the sign of Eliza. In The Undying Amelia's power becomes entangled in some oddly misogynistic, and not unfamiliar figurations of women, particularly in Gothic texts. Amelia is an embodiment of a type of vagina-dentata, of the female as monstrous. This leads to one particularly troubling scene in which the African character, Wadawaka, subdues her through his virile, black sexuality. The scene moves oddly between romance and outright porn, where Amelia explains that her attempts to subdue Wadawaka fail because he tears

past whatever defences still remain and pierc[es] me to my very vitals. I give a shriek. I have never known a man in this way and am afraid. Then I feel my body responding and try to rake his face with my nails, try to get at him with my fangs, but I am mortified when he laughs as he continues to violate me.⁴⁹

Mudrooroo manages to represent Amelia as simultaneously promiscuous and virginal, ironically echoing the construction of Eliza in many of the 'rewritings' of the latter's story. If Mudrooroo is known for his refusal to conform, and for his determination to defy expectations, this penultimate chapter of The Undying seems to push him to new extremes. To understand what he is doing it is necessary to return to the beginning of the novel, and to listen to the story, told by Jangamuttuk's son George.

The Undying begins as a yarn, a song cycle. A stranger, George, named after a mad King, approaches a fire by night and offers to "exchange my yarn for your company."⁵⁰ We discover in this 'prologue' within Chapter One that George is 'the undying', all that is left "at the end of [the] western voyage."⁵¹ George is a vampire who has to avoid the full light of day ever since "an old granny ghost touched me with her teeth and followed after us."⁵² The effect of this is to replace his

⁴⁸ For an account of the Fraser legend and for critical analysis of the way she has been 'read', see Kay Schaffer, In the Wake of First Contact: The Eliza Fraser Stories (Melbourne: CUP, 1995); and Ian McNiven, Lynette Russell & Kay Schaffer, Constructions of Colonialism: Perspectives on Eliza Fraser's Shipwreck (London: Leicester UP, 1998). See also Gerry Turcotte, "Coming Out of the Closet: Sexual Politic in Michael Ondaatje's the man with seven toes," in La création biographique: Biographical Creation, ed. Marta Dvorak (Rennes: les Presses Universitaires Rennes, 1997): 101—10; and "'Fears of Primitive Otherness': 'Race' in Michael Ondaatje's the man with seven toes," in Constructions of Colonialism: Perspectives on Eliza Fraser's Shipwreck, ed. Ian McNiven, Lynette Russell & Kay Schaffer (London: Leicester UP, 1998): 138—50, for a reading of the "cannibalizing" of Eliza Fraser by critics, and for a contextualizing of this story according to both 'race' and gender in Michael Ondaatje's the man with seven toes respectively. The latter articles suggest precisely the sort of readings of Aboriginal sexual and cultural depravity and objectification which Mudrooroo is writing against.

⁴⁹ Mudrooroo, Undying, 188.

⁵⁰ Mudrooroo, Undying, 1.

⁵¹ Mudrooroo, Undying, 1.

⁵² Mudrooroo, Undying, 2.

Aboriginal visions with hers: “She gave me dreams that were not my dreams, and that is part of my story.”⁵³

This line is important because the book is about the power and battle over dreamings. And it is particularly significant when read in the context of Master of the Ghost Dreaming, which ends with the escape from Fada’s (G.A. Robinson’s) prison island. What saves them all in Master of the Ghost Dreaming, of course, is Jangamuttuk’s Ghost Dreaming. But in The Undying we are told that he failed: “never did we escape the influence of the ghosts.”⁵⁴ For every possession, there is a dispossession. For a ghost to take over a soul, a soul must be lost. For land to be taken, someone must be dispossessed. For Aboriginal people, this moment of invasion is particularly uncanny. They are simultaneously possessed and dispossessed; they are taken over and disowned.

The Undying is a darker, more confusing narrative than Master of the Ghost Dreaming, because it begins by refusing the optimism of the latter’s ending. It begins by announcing the end, and in this way returns us to the tone of Doctor Wooreddy. The small group of people who escaped Flinder’s Island on a stolen ship at the end of Master of the Ghost Dreaming have died or disappeared. Augustus, George’s brother, has fallen from the mast and drowned. The others, one by one, have perished. The ship has become specifically gothic: the breeze rattles “like dead men’s bones”, the rigging sounds like “giant bat wings”.⁵⁵ The narrator becomes a type of Ancient Mariner, announcing the end of the “songline”.⁵⁶ “I do not want tea. I want your ears so that I can tell you of those days which we thought belonged to us, for we were powerful in song.”⁵⁷ George, the undying, is the last of his mob, strangely echoing, and hence cleverly refuting, a range of colonial narratives, from The Last of the Mohicans to the obscene fiction that Trucannini was the last of the Aboriginal Tasmanians.

This, then, is where the prologue ends, and where the tale begins. The story that George tells is ‘ruptured’ when they meet Amelia Fraser who takes over as narrator after she has bitten George. At the moment of infection, the narrative slips out of George’s sole control. The voice of the narrative, in other words, is possessed, just as his body has been, by the European vampire.

Where in Dracula, the Count’s designs on England, metaphorically represented by his importing of his dark earth, suggest the possible colonisation of the centre by the feared other, in The Undying Mudrooroo reverses this model to embody England’s devastating visitation as the

⁵³ Mudrooroo, Undying, 2.

⁵⁴ Mudrooroo, Undying, 19.

⁵⁵ Mudrooroo, Undying, 3.

⁵⁶ Mudrooroo, Undying, 4.

⁵⁷ Mudrooroo, Undying, 4.

feared vampiric force. Amelia's journey to Australia is an odd refiguration of the Dracula legend, conjoined with a number of other European narratives.

There are two other major players who need to be briefly introduced into this tale before a full stock can be taken. One of these is a violent military commander, Captain Torrens, who is at his most cruel when the moon is full, which is when he becomes a werebear. Torren's job is to defend the new colony from the attacks of the Aborigines, though, unbeknownst to him, his retaliation is in response to acts of violence committed by Amelia.

At one stage, as he surveys the "mutilated bodies" of the Aboriginal men he has slaughtered and disembowelled, "hanging all in a row" as a warning to the Blacks, he searches for a missing soldier and thinks "a flogging will add to the romance of this desolate shore. The stinking savages hanging dead and the thud of the lash upon a deserter's flesh – what else could we do to realise this Gothic scene?"⁵⁸

It is as though Mudrooroo has asked himself this same question. He provides one last ingredient, perhaps by way of an answer, a figure of ridicule who is an outcast among his people. Gunatinga (Dungeater) is a hopeless figure who is rejected by his tribe, is crippled by a spear wound to his leg, and has made himself central to his people through duplicity and luck. It is he who first stumbles on the wreck of the Kore which brought Amelia to Australia, and significantly, as he approaches it, he is said to have "entered the uncanny".⁵⁹

Dungeater is a "man of many names", redefining himself as he progresses through the story, increasingly gaining a sense of self-importance which 'real' shamen, such as Jangamuttuk and Waai, can easily see through. Dungeater makes two important discoveries when he first approaches the ship. The first is its severed figurehead, "a woman coloured like moma, a spirit all white with red painted lips and nipples. Long flowing yellow hair had been carved about the features."⁶⁰ This iconographic representation of Amelia herself is also an intertextual gesture towards the figurehead which was central to the White woman of Gippsland story, another putative tale of a kidnapped white woman which justified a series of punitive expeditions until it was discovered that the woman never existed; that she was merely a ship's figurehead which a local Aboriginal tribe had used as a centrepiece for its corroborees.⁶¹ The second major discovery is Amelia herself. Or, to be more precise, Amelia, sensing Dungeater's malleability, discovers him, and calls him to her cave. Amelia realises that she will need an assistant, and instead of killing him, she speaks to him telepathically,

⁵⁸ Mudrooroo, Undying, 124.

⁵⁹ Mudrooroo, Undying, 81.

⁶⁰ Mudrooroo, Undying, 80.

“in pictures”. She names him Renfield and asks, “Can you pronounce that in your rude language?”⁶² The answer, clearly, is no, and so he becomes “Renfiel”. When she makes him drink her blood she re-enacts the famous scene in Dracula where the Count forces Mina to drink. Amelia holds him “tightly so that he must fill his mouth with my blood then swallow it.”⁶³ Unlike Mina, where the enforced fellatio cannot be spoken, here it is fixated upon. Indeed, it could easily be said that the entire narrative has an oral fixation.

Dungeater, then, is a peculiar figure between worlds. He is a Spirit Master to his people, and a “trusty servant” to Amelia. He is, in fact, an overloaded figure, invoking the limping grotesque assistant of so many monster narratives, a type of dark Quasimodo. He is also, of course, a gesture towards the original Renfield from Dracula, the betrayer of his own people who allows Dracula into the asylum to feast on Mina. More intriguingly, he invokes another Bram Stoker character, the figure of Oolanga, from The Lair of the White Worm (1914), a black servant who similarly served a white female demon, Arabella (and the parallel in names may not be accidental).

All these characters move towards a final resolution. The werebear is defeated (though not killed) by Amelia, who in turn is subdued by Wadawaka. The distant and local Aboriginal groups combine their power to wipe out the ghost settlement, and yet somehow Amelia escapes. The book ends with an allusion to a new songline, “The Song of the Nomad”, a story which begins, “He came from the sea, from the cool, cool sea, he rose to hurry us west.”⁶⁴ These are the unmistakable tones of the Western, perhaps a dark parody – a reclaiming of Pale Rider – as Wadawaka assumes his spirit shape and goes in search of Amelia, to annihilate the one who is worse than all of them. George, who has not shown an inability to tolerate the sun after he has been contaminated, has presumably progressively worsened. The last page returns us to the first, with the conclusion of the yarn he promised to tell, and the hint of the next to come.

So what are we to make of this extraordinary tale? A superficial reading of this complex text might lead us to conclude that it was generically and intertextually ‘promiscuous’ to its peril; that the metaphoric and postmodern play collapses upon itself into a nihilistic scenario, speaking the defeat of the Aboriginal people at the hands of White culture. Instead, I would like to suggest that in The Undying, Mudrooroo specifically invokes a range of master narratives in order to expose their hidden agendas. He invokes the codes of representation which so frequently frame female

⁶¹ For more information on this tale see Kate Darian-Smith, Roslyn Poignant & Kay Schaffer, Captured Lives: Australian Captivity Narratives, Working Papers in Australian Studies, nos. 85, 86, 87 (London: Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, 1993).

⁶² Mudrooroo, Undying, 93.

⁶³ Mudrooroo, Undying, 93.

⁶⁴ Mudrooroo, Undying, 201.

sexuality as predatory, available and compromised. Similarly, the fetishized black male body is brought to life in this tale, with every cliché and stereotype imaginable.⁶⁵

Many of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century texts which are gestured towards, or which are cleverly plagiarised in The Undying, are tremendously undercoded at the level of performance. Like Dracula, they allude to an uncontrollable desire, but they vie away from expressing it. The texts, therefore, are redolent with contradiction – they are contra/dictions: against utterance. Similarly, the project of Empire has been both explicit and indirect, admitting to its totalitarian vision of colonisation, and yet simultaneously couching this desire/design within a rhetoric of, dare one say, missionary purpose, of colonising for the good of the colonised. This double vision is expressed through many of the narratives which Mudrooroo invokes in his novel. In The Undying Mudrooroo reveals the hidden, he enacts the unperformed, he declares the unspoken.

If Stephen Arata is correct when he argues that Dracula, published in 1897, articulated a fin de siècle fear of “reverse colonization”, how fitting that Mudrooroo’s The Undying, published almost exactly a century later, should speak to a similar millennial terror, though articulated in a specifically Australian context.

Ken Gelder’s and Jane Jacob’s Uncanny Australia (1998) identifies the way the Aboriginal sacred, reinforced by the Australian High Court’s Native Title Act (or Mabo) decision, has led to many white Australians feeling dispossessed in their own country. There is a misinformed yet pervading fear that Aboriginal people will reclaim their land – that they will rise from nothingness, from terra nullius – and avenge themselves. Mudrooroo plays with these fears of ‘reverse colonization’ and allows them to haunt the Australian imaginary.

Finally, like an Anne Rice novel perhaps, Mudrooroo writes The Undying in the style of an autobiography of sorts, a self-scripting which refuses the construction of the Aborigine as other. This story is told by the vampire himself – to a specifically white audience. And the story George tells us is distressing yet hopeful. Far from the optimistic voyage promised at the conclusion of Master of the Ghost Dreaming, in The Undying we are alerted to the dire fact of contamination. It is fitting that the story should shift from the perspective of Jangamuttuk, a full blood Aboriginal character, to George, a man who is Aboriginal but who also carries “a bit of old England in Me,”⁶⁶ as he points out at the start of the next book in the series, Underground.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ For an examination of this figuration see bell hooks’s argument, building on Michael Dyson, that in the tales of Empire, Black men are constructed as “‘peripatetic phalluses with unrequited desire for their denied object — white women’. As the story goes this desire is not based on longing for sexual pleasure. It is a story of revenge, rape as the weapon by which black men, the dominated, reverse their circumstance, regain power over white men.” [bell hooks, Yearnings: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics (Boston: South End P, 1990): 58].

⁶⁶ Mudrooroo, Undying, 1.

⁶⁷ Indeed, as is revealed in Underground, George’s real father is George Augustus Robinson himself!

The Undying is a novel which acknowledges the virulent contamination of Aboriginal culture by the European settlers, a contagion which is enacted biologically, but also narratively. Aboriginal culture is irredeemably changed because of the predations of the otherworldly ghosts, just as the songlines are forever different because of the texts of Empire. It is for this reason that The Undying is haunted by European references – not to signal how it has been dispossessed by an unavoidable intertextuality, but rather that it has survived this spectral legacy. And perhaps in a mischievously reassuring note to all those anxious Australians in terror of their own imminent dispossession at the hands of Aboriginal land rights activists, Mudrooroo also makes the point that the Aboriginal spirit is not identical to the European num. As George puts it in the closing words of The Undying, in exchange for the Aboriginal stories which will entertain and enrich the listeners, he “will exact something in return, but do not be afraid – I am not that greedy!”⁶⁸

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⁶⁸ Mudrooroo, Undying, 202.

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